Parashat Emor: Mimetic or Transformative?

Rabbi Joshua Rabin, Astoria Center of Israel, Astoria, New York[1]

Vayikra 22:31	
וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם֙ מִצְוֹתַ֔י וַעֲשִׂיתֶ֖ם אֹתָ֑ם אֲנִ֖י יְהוָֽה׃	You shall faithfully observe My mitzvot: I am יהוה.

1. **Mitzvot for their Own Sake**

M. Kallah Rabbati 8:8	
ר׳ מאיר אומר. ת״ר מעשה בר׳ מאיר שהלך למקום אחד שאלו זקן אחד מהו שכתוב ריח ניחוח אשה לה׳ לא היה בידו נכנס לבית המדרש ושאל א״ל כאן בעוסקים לשמה וכאן בעוסקים שלא לשמה. ולר׳ מאיר אדתני כל העוסק בתורה לשמה לית ליה הא דא״ר יוחנן ויאמר ה׳ על עזבם את תורתי לא על ע״ז ולא על גילוי עריות ושפיכות דמים אמר הקב״ה לא הגליתי את ישראל אלא בשביל שעזבו את תורתי שנאמר אותי עזבו ואת תורתי לא שמרו. האותי עזבו למה תורתי לא שמרו מכאן אמרו חכמים לעולם יעסוק אדם בתורה אפילו שלא לשמה שמתוך שלא לשמה בא לשמה.	R. Meir said': The Rabbis have taught: R. Meir once went to a certain place where an old man asked him, 'Why is it written, *It is a sweet savor, an offering made by fire unto the Lord*, [and elsewhere it is written, *An offering made by fire, of a sweet savor unto the Lord*]?' He was not in possession [of the answer], so he went to the *Beth Hammidrash* and inquired. They told him, 'The one passage refers to those who occupy themselves with the study of the Torah for its own sake, and the other to those who occupy themselves not for its own sake.' As for R. Meir, who taught: 'Whoever occupies himself with the Torah for its own sake,' etc., was he not in possession of what R. Joḥanan said: [It is written,] *And the Lord saith: Because they have forsaken My law which I set before them*, etc.: The Holy One, blessed be He, said [54*b*], 'I have exiled Israel not because of idolatry, immorality, and murder, but because they forsook My law; as it is stated, *And have forsaken Me, and have not kept My law*—if they forsook Me why did they not keep My law?' Hence, the Sages declared: Let a man ever occupy himself with the Torah, even not for its own sake, because by doing it not for its own sake, he will come to do it for its own sake.
כי קאמר בשיטת ר׳ עקיבא דתניא ר׳ עקיבא אומר כל הקורא שלא לשמה נוח לו שאילו נהפכה שליתו על פניו שנאמר ושמרתם מצותי ועשיתם אותם כל הקורא לשמה מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו עשה עצמו שנא׳ ועשיתם אותם. מתיבין תיובתא למילי דר׳ יוחנן מפני מה חרבה ירושלם בראשונה מפני ע״ז ובאחרונה מפני שנאת חנם הא לית בה תרתי אמר לך ר׳ יוחנן האי הקב״ה הוא דקאמר הכי אותי עזבו מה טעם דתורתי לא שמרו. הא	[R. Meir] made his statement on the principle of R. 'Aḳiba, for it has been taught: R. 'Aḳiba said: Whoever reads [the Torah] not for its own sake, it were better for him that he had died at birth; for it is stated, *And ye shall keep My commandments, and do them*. But whoever reads [the Torah] for its own sake, Scripture accounts it to him as though he had fulfilled [the precepts], as stated, *And do them*. The following was quoted in refutation of R. Joḥanan's statement: What was the cause of the first destruction of Jerusalem? Idolatry. And of the second destruction? Causeless hatred; so were there not two causes? R. Joḥanan can reply: It is the Holy One, blessed be He, Who spoke

[1] All translations are from Sefaria, unless otherwise noted.

אילו תורתי שמרו אותי לא עזבו. ואי משום דקא מקשית בית שני שנאת חנם דחמיר טפי מע״ז ומנא לן דכתיב חבור עצבים אפרים הנח לו בזמן שהם מתחברין ואפי' לעצביהם הנח להם. חלק לבם עתה יאשמו. אי הכי בראשון אמאי שאני בית ראשון דהוה מאריך להם מימות רחבעם. ואי בעית אימא ראשון נמי משום חלק חרב.	thus: *They have forsaken Me*. Why? Because *they have not kept My law;* consequently, if they had kept My law, they would not have forsaken Me. And as to your question on [the destruction of] the Second Temple, causeless hatred is different because it is more grievous than idolatry. Whence do we know this? For it is written, *Ephraim is joined to idols; let him alone:* As long as they are joined together even [to worship] their idols, *leave them alone;* [and it is written,] *Their heart is divided; now shall they bear their guilt*. If so, what [was the cause of] the first destruction? With the First Temple, it was different; He deferred the punishment from the days of Rehoboam. Or, if you wish, I can say that the First Temple was also destroyed because *their heart is divided*.
ת״ר כל השונא כאילו הורגו שנאמר וכי יהיה איש שונא לרעהו וארב לו וקם עליו הא אילו היה ספק בידו היה הורגו.	The Rabbis have taught: Whoever hates another is as though he were his murderer, as it is stated, *But if any man hate his neighbor, and lie in wait for him, and rise up against him, and smite him mortally that he die*—were it in his power he would kill him.

2. Mimetic or Transformative?

Philip Jackson, "The Mimetic and the Transformative: Alternative Outlooks on Teaching"
A crucial property of mimetic knowledge is its reproducibility. It is this property that allows us to say it is "transmitted" from teacher to student or from text to student. Yet when we speak of it that way, we usually have in mind a very special kind of process. It does not entail handing over a bundle of some sort as in an actual "exchange" or "giving." Rather, it is more like the transmission of a spoken message from one person to another or the spread of bacteria from a cold-sufferer to a new victim. In all such instances, both parties wind up possessing what was formerly possessed by only one of them. What has been transmitted has actually been "mirrored' or "reproduced' without its ever having been relinquished in the process…
The root image within the transformative tradition is entirely different. It is much closer to that of a potter working with clay than it is to someone using the potter's handiwork as a container for whatever contents such a vessel might hold. The potter, as we know, not only leaves her imprint on the vessel itself in the form of a signature of some kind, she actually molds and shapes the object as she creates it. All who later work with the finished product have a different relationship to it entirely...But all such actions accept the object in question as a "given," something whose essence is fundamentally sacrosanct.

Professor Haym Soloveitchik, "Rupture and Reconstruction"
…the Halakhah is a sweepingly comprehensive regulation of daily life-covering not only prayer and divine service but equally food, drink, dress, sexual relations between man and wife, the rhythms of work patterns of rest-it constitutes a way of life. And a way of life is not learned but rather absorbed… imbibed from parents and friends, and patterned on conduct regularly observed in home and street, synagogue, and school.

3. Does the Reason Matter?

Bavli Sotah 47a	
וְהָאָמַר רַב יְהוּדָה אָמַר רַב: לְעוֹלָם יַעֲסוֹק אָדָם בְּתוֹרָה וּבְמִצְוֹת, וְאַף עַל פִּי שֶׁלֹּא לִשְׁמָהּ. שֶׁמִּתּוֹךְ שֶׁלֹּא לִשְׁמָהּ — בָּא לִשְׁמָהּ.	**But didn't Rav Yehuda say** that **Rav says: A person should always engage in Torah** study **and** in the performance of **mitzvot, even** if he does so **not for their own sake, as though** such acts performed **not for their own sake,** one will **come** to perform them **for their own sake.**